Revenge served hot: Seneca's *Thyestes*

Erica Bexley

Seneca's *Thyestes* is a tragedy about brutal revenge and bitter hatred between two brothers. Thyestes has committed adultery with Aerope, the wife of his brother Atreus. In response, Atreus butchers Thyestes' children and serves them to him, cooked. But why does Atreus go to such gruesome lengths? And why does Thyestes fall straight into Atreus' trap? Join Erica Bexley as she searches for answers in the dark and dangerous world of Senecan drama.

Family is an important theme in Seneca's play. When Atreus makes his first appearance on stage, he explains that Thyestes has wronged him by seducing his wife and usurping his position as king of Mycenae. These events appear to have happened several years in the past, and although Atreus has recovered his crown in the meantime, he still wants to exact revenge. A proud and violent man, Atreus feels humiliated by the insults he has suffered at his brother's hands. He is also anxious about the parentage of his two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus; he suspects they might be Thyestes' children. It is partly because of this suspicion that Atreus decides to invite his brother back from exile and trick him into an act of cannibalism. In a bizarre and illogical way, Atreus wants to ensure the legitimacy of his own sons by forcing Thyestes to eat *his*. Atreus also thinks that if he involves Agamemnon and Menelaus in his plot, their willingness to harm Thyestes will prove that they are, in fact, Atreus' legitimate children. If this process of reasoning seems odd to you, that's because it is odd. But Atreus does not care about whether his revenge makes sense: he just wants to hurt Thyestes' side of the family in much the same way that Thyestes has hurt his.

The back story to this cycle of violence begins with Atreus and Thyestes' grandfather, Tantalus, who appears in the first scene of Seneca's play. Tantalus has been punished for a crime similar to Atreus': he killed and cooked his own child, Pelops, serving him up at a banquet of the gods. Horrified by the trick, the gods condemned Tantalus to stand eternally in a river, while enticing clusters of fruit grew from trees above his head. Whenever Tantalus bent to drink the water, the river dried up; whenever he stretched to eat the fruit, it rose beyond his reach. As Seneca's play begins, Tantalus is in hell, tormented by a Fury who forces him to revisit the world of the living and inspire wickedness in his descendants. Tantalus has no choice but to obey the Fury, and his actions make him partly responsible for the tragic events that follow. In fact, Tantalus becomes a symbol for everything that is about to happen between Atreus and Thyestes: he represents not only murder and cannibalism, but also greed and desire. Tantalus, as we shall see, embodies hunger in its purest form.

Can't get no satisfaction

As well as suffering from hunger, Tantalus imposes it on the world around him. When he stalks towards Atreus' palace, he causes riverbeds to dry up (107–8) and fruit to shrivel on its branches (110–11). This is exactly the same kind of punishment that Tantalus himself endures in the underworld. It is also a punishment that he will visit upon his grandchildren: he will, as the Fury says, make them thirst for blood (*sitiant cruorem*, 102). In Atreus' case, this thirst is metaphorical; in Thyestes', it is horribly literal.

Unlike Tantalus, Atreus doesn't care about the demands of his stomach; he is hungry only for revenge. In the play's second act, when he is busy deciding which crimes to commit against his brother, Atreus remarks that he does not yet feel mad enough (*satis*, 252) and that he wants to be filled (*impleri*, 253) with yet more monstrous intent. He continues to seek satisfaction throughout the play, first declaring his manner of revenge 'more than enough' (*abunde*, 279), but concluding, later on, that Thyestes' suffering is still insufficient. Amazingly, Atreus never truly manages to feel satisfied, even after he has achieved all of his wishes by compelling Thyestes to consume his offspring. In the play's final act, although Atreus once again refers to his crime as 'more than enough' (*abunde est*, 889), he goes on to complain of his continuing dissatisfaction (*sed cur satis sit?* 890). The more Atreus accomplishes, it seems, the more he wants to accomplish. Far from quenching his desire for revenge, Atreus ends up being consumed by it.

Thyestes is tempted

How, then, does Thyestes fit into this contorted family tree? And why does he fall prey to Atreus' murderous plot? According to Atreus himself, Thyestes is a bloodthirsty criminal always searching for the opportunity to perpetrate terrible deeds. One of the ways in which Atreus justifies his revenge is by claiming that Thyestes would do exactly the same, if only he had the chance. But the Thyestes we meet in the play's third act does not immediately match this description. He is returning from exile, where he has learnt to enjoy the peace and quiet of simple country life. Spending time away from the palace has taught Thyestes the valuable lesson that absolute power brings only distrust, fear, and unhappiness. In contrast to Atreus' excess, Thyestes speaks of moderation (455–70). He also suspects Atreus' motives, which shows that he is not deceived by the superficial kindness of his brother's invitation. Atreus asks Thyestes to share the kingdom with him. If Thyestes is as wise as he appears to be, why does he accept?

The answer is that Thyestes is weak, not wise. Although he preaches moderation, he can't resist the opportunity to resume royal power. It is clear from Thyestes' very first speech that he longs for the wealth and glory that attends the kingship of Mycenae (404–11). As a result, he alternates between fear and desire, unsure whether to accept Atreus' offer or to flee once more into the woods. The children notice their father's reluctance and persuade him to proceed. Significantly, Thyestes' eldest son is named Tantalus,

which makes him into a powerful symbol of hunger and temptation. Just like his great-grandfather, young Tantalus incites Thyestes' immoral desires: the boy argues in favour of kingship, as a consequence of which he draws his father back into a world of violence and tyrannical greed. Of course, young Tantalus' arguments are well meant – he does not intend his father any harm – but they also evoke a way of life that Thyestes has been trying in vain to escape.

In another respect, young Tantalus resembles the Fury of Act 1. Just as this hellish creature goads Tantalus senior, so Tantalus junior goads his father. Both victims respond in similar ways, too: the elder Tantalus declares he will follow the Fury (*sequor*, 100), while Thyestes remarks to his sons, 'I follow you, I do not lead' (*ego vos sequor, non duco*). Seneca draws our attention to this similarity because he wants us to be aware of Thyestes' weakness. He wants to show us, too, that Thyestes has the potential to be as wicked and greedy as his grandfather, Tantalus. In the end, it appears that Atreus was right to paint such a black picture of Thyestes' character.

Adulterers and cannibals

Atreus' choice of revenge may seem strange at first – why repay adultery with enforced cannibalism? How could these two acts possibly be connected? If we examine it closely, Atreus' revenge actually reveals a peculiar kind of logic: he punishes Thyestes' appetite for sex via his appetite for food. By committing adultery with Atreus' wife, Thyestes has upset the balance of normal family relationships. In recompense, Atreus further confuses the boundaries of Thyestes' bloodline, forcing him into an unnatural interrelationship with his own offspring. In a sense, Atreus reunites the family bonds, just in a very twisted way.

Thyestes' cannibalism bears a remarkable resemblance to pregnancy; he has, after all, put his own children inside his belly. He even describes his own fullness in terms that make it sound as if the children were living things, moving about inside him. Turmoil shakes Thyestes' guts (999) and something seems to groan deep within his stomach (1001). The idea that Thyestes could be 'pregnant' makes his punishment seem even more appropriate because it combines the themes of sex and food into one gruesome event. Atreus, you may recall, spends a lot of the play worrying about the legitimacy of his own children, which means that he worries about his wife's past pregnancies. To rid himself of this worry, he forces a strange version of pregnancy upon his brother. Atreus' anxiety about parentage tortures him throughout the drama, so he decides to torture Thyestes is a similar way, by letting his children 'punish' him (1112). Thyestes' children become a source of regret and anguish – because he has eaten them – just as Atreus' children become a source of regret and anguish because their bloodline is uncertain.

Atreus delights in such perverse ideas, and draws attention to them in the scene immediately following Thyestes' banquet. At this late stage in the drama, Thyestes is full to bursting and more than a little uncomfortable. He asks to see his sons. Atreus replies that Thyestes has his sons – no day will ever take them from him! Atreus also mixes wine with the children's blood and urges Thyestes to drink from 'the family cup' (*poculum gentile*, 982–3). This scene shows that Atreus is cruel to the point of insanity: any normal banquet would be a moment for Thyestes to reaffirm his connection with his family. With Atreus as host, however, that connection becomes hideously literal! And revolting!

Beasts, gods, men, food

Clearly, Atreus' house is not somewhere you would want to go for dinner. The crime Atreus commits is truly shocking; it seems even worse when we consider that it overturns all rules of hospitality and sacrifice. The meal that Atreus serves marks him out as a brutish, uncivilized host. He perverts the practice of welcoming and entertaining a guest to the extent that his behaviour places him outside the standard boundaries of human society. Seneca reinforces this idea by likening Atreus to various kinds of aggressive animals: he is a hunting dog (497–503); a tigress (707–11); a lion (732–6). Although Thyestes is the one who has, actually, been living in the wilderness, Atreus is the one who behaves like a wild beast.

On a more complex level, Atreus also commits a crime against religion, because he slaughters Thyestes' children as if he were conducting a sacrifice to the gods. He refers to Thyestes' sons as sacrificial animals (*victimas*, 545) and he undertakes the killing with meticulous attention to ritual detail. In Greek and Roman religion, sacrifice is meant to promote communion between men and gods. But Atreus, by corrupting the ritual, sets the gods to flight. The Sun is so sickened by Atreus' deeds that he plunges the world into darkness.

As Seneca explores these themes of hospitality and sacrifice, he demonstrates the important role that food plays in social ritual. Eating together is a way for people to acknowledge social bonds; sacrifice, likewise, promotes social cohesion and defines man's place in relationship to the gods. Food may even be said to determine a basic hierarchy, with beasts at the bottom, men in the middle, gods at the top. When Atreus kills and cooks Thyestes' children, he destroys this hierarchy entirely. Given the important role food plays in constructing and maintaining social relationships, it is not surprising that Atreus' crime has far-reaching consequences, consequences that affect not only Thyestes, but the universe as well.

Punishment

Seneca's play has a strange ending: Thyestes suffers while Atreus appears to get off scot-free. Instead of being punished for his crimes, Atreus boasts that he is 'equal to the stars' (*aequalis astris,* 885) and remarks arrogantly that he is capable of banishing the gods (*dimitto superos*, 888). Where is the justice in this? When people read the *Thyestes*, they often feel dissatisfied with the way it ends: they want to see good triumph over evil, and they don't like the fact that Atreus is not punished for his wickedness. But is this really the case? I think Atreus *does* suffer, not physically, but mentally and emotionally. He is tortured by his anxieties and he never manages to feel satisfied. The monstrosity of Atreus' crimes also makes him into a kind of monster, or beast. In this way, Atreus becomes his own punishment, destroying his humanity in order to avenge himself upon his brother. Atreus ends up being the victim of his own wickedness, so perhaps there is some justice after all.

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